

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000422

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, DRL/CRA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03-09-14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Campaign Snapshot: Despite LTTE rift, Tamil party busy on hustings; Election violence low, so far

Refs: Colombo 406, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) In this message, Mission reviews the following items related to Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary election campaign:

-- Despite LTTE split, pro-Tiger party carries on campaign;

-- Extremist Buddhist monks launch effort;

-- Incidents of campaign-related violence on low side, so far;

-- President's brother declares his candidacy for presidency (well ahead of 2005 or 2006 election);

-- In our "Flavor of the Campaign" section: Strict rules enforced on use of election posters, banners, etc.

Pro-Tiger party continues its campaign

2. (SBU) Despite the recent split in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization between northern and eastern elements (see Reftels), the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a pro-LTTE political grouping, continues to campaign actively. R. Sampathan, a senior TNA MP, for example, kicked off the TNA campaign in Trincomalee District on March 7, and canvassing is continuing in Jaffna. In the eastern districts of Batticaloa and Ampara, however, TNA candidates have reportedly had to adjust their campaigning schedules due to tensions arising in that region due to the LTTE split. (There have been several rallies and a work stoppage in the east in favor of rebel LTTE commander Karuna in the past several days -- see Reftels.) The TNA has denied press reports that it has suspended its Batticaloa and Ampara campaigns due to tensions in those areas.

3. (C) COMMENT: Before the split in the LTTE emerged last week, observers predicted that the TNA could win up to 20-22 seats (up from 15) and perhaps hold the balance of power in the next Parliament. At this point, that would still seem possible, but it would appear to depend to some extent on whether or not the rift in the LTTE continues. Tensions, for example, are high in Batticaloa and, if there is violence between competing LTTE factions, that could seriously impact the Tamil vote. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the TNA itself could be split between elements that are in favor of the main LTTE organization versus those that are in favor of the Karuna faction. Such a split would almost certainly undermine LTTE influence in Parliament. Already, there are indications that some TNA elements are leaning toward Karuna. END COMMENT.

Extremist Buddhist monks launch effort

4. (SBU) The Sinhalese extremist Janatha Hela Urumaya (JHU) party has begun its election campaign. (The JHU is the new name for the Sihala Urumaya, SU, party. Last month, the JHU announced that it was fielding an all-monk slate of candidates -- see Reftels.) On March 2, the over 200 monks-cum-candidates for JHU kicked off their campaign with a rally near Colombo. At the rally, the Venerable Omalpe Sobitha, a monk and one of the key JHU leaders, was quoted as stating: "Unity is the first priority, federalism is rejected. There can be no division under any circumstances." The group's election manifesto has also been released, and it advocates programs for "protecting Buddhism" and ending corruption. Along the lines of Ven. Sobitha's remarks,

the manifesto was also skeptical of negotiations with the LTTE about power-sharing for the north/east and the Norwegian government's peace facilitation effort.

15. (C) COMMENT: The running of an all-monk slate is unprecedented in Sri Lankan history -- and has been controversial. As flagged in Reftels, for example, the JHU has faced a harsh backlash from many Buddhists who do not believe that monks should engage in politics. That said, for a small party, the JHU seems to have picked up some political momentum, much of it from the novelty factor of running monks. While it is very early, some observers even believe the party may pick up some seats in Parliament (the SU had none in the last Parliament). This possibility is of concern to the alliance between the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, which believes that any JHU support comes at the expense of the SLFP-JVP vote base. END COMMENT.

=====

Violence on Low Side, so far

=====

16. (U) A report by the Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) issued on March 8 reports 321 total incidents of campaign-related violence since February 17, the date when nominations for the April 2 election began. The incidents range from murder, (the political killings of two Tamils in the East -- see Reftels), attempted murder, to threats and intimidation. The CMEV report notes that the percentage of what it terms "major incidents" of violence is lower than at a similar stage in the 2001 parliamentary election, but terms these incidents of violence "a disturbing trend as the campaign gains momentum." The Police Elections Secretariat, in a separate tabulation, has also recorded

SIPDIS

approximately 300 incidents of violence in the run-up to the election.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Heading into this campaign there was considerable anxiety that cohabitation tensions between the President and the Prime Minister heralded a very violent campaign. While the CMEV's report does indicate that the campaign has had many instances of violence, the report is accurate when it states that the situation appears a bit calmer than recent Sri Lankan national elections at this point in the campaign cycle. It is not clear why this might be the case, although the Election Commissioner does appear to be holding tighter reins on the situation than in the past (see below). As CMEV also notes, however, it is still early in the campaign cycle, and the situation could easily flare up in the next several weeks. END COMMENT.

=====

President's Brother Throws Hat into Ring

=====

18. (SBU) Late March 2, Anura Bandaranaike, a senior SLFP MP and brother of President Kumaratunga, announced that he wants to be the next SLFP presidential candidate. Bandaranaike's announcement was an early one: Sri Lanka's next presidential election will take place in either late 2005 or late 2006. (The exact timing of the election depends on how a complicated dispute concerning the length of President Kumaratunga's term is settled -- see Reftels.) In a lengthy interview with the English-language DAILY MIRROR newspaper published on March 3, Bandaranaike also stated that he would be "the last of the Bandaranaikes to be in politics and the dynasty will end with me." He also characterized himself "a ruthlessly honest politician."

19. (C) COMMENT: Bandaranaike, 55, would seem to be a leading contender for the SLFP nomination. First, he is the brother of the President, and both his parents were SLFP prime ministers, which counts for a lot in the SLFP (his father founded the party). He has huge political problems, however. While affable, he is not considered a serious thinker and some even consider him a bit of a buffoon. It is also not clear whether he has the support of his sister, who is thought to distrust him for defecting from the SLFP years ago (he returned to the party fold in 2001). In throwing his hat into the ring, Bandaranaike also has a major rival: senior SLFP MP and former Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapakse is thought to maintain considerable grassroots support in the SLFP. END COMMENT.

=====

Campaign Posters and Banners: Banned

=====

¶10. (U) In our "Flavor of the Campaign" section: The Election Commissioner's Office has issued an order banning campaign posters, banners, cutouts and other public displays related to the election, as well as the use of motorcades and other processions without prior permission. The Commissioner's office also ordered the police to enforce the ban in a strict manner (the police have received a special allocation of Rs. 8.2 million -- about USD 82,000 -- to do this). By all accounts, the ban has been quite successful: Although there are posters and banners up in some spots in the country, there is much less than in previous campaigns. Colombo, for example, has much less election-related paraphernalia in evidence than during the December 2001 parliamentary election campaign. A poster featuring a picture of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and President Bush was put up near a prominent Colombo roundabout and removed two days later, for example.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: In issuing the order, the Election Commissioner's office was enforcing a long-standing law banning campaign posters, banners, etc. The law was meant to forestall lavish expenditures by candidates and parties, and, in general, reduce the clutter and resulting litter. While admirable in its intent, the relatively strict enforcement of the law has taken some of the flavor (and fun) out of the campaign. In most of Colombo, for example, it is hard to know that a campaign is going on at all. One decided positive, however, is that enforcement of the law may be helping lower temperatures and thus reduce campaign violence. END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD